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Critical Terms: Iconography transcript

Angeliki Lymberopoulou: Hello. I am Angeliki Lymberopoulou. I am a senior lecturer in art history at the Open University. I am a Byzantine art historian and archaeologist.

Rembrandt Duits: And I am Rembrandt Duits. I work at the Warburg Institute in London. I'm the deputy curator of the photographic collection there. And I work also on Renaissance art and material culture.

Angeliki Lymberopoulou: The term we will be discussing today is iconography, which comes from the Greek word [GREEK] and literally means writing in images.

Rembrandt Duits: Which you, of course, would know, being Greek.

Angeliki Lymberopoulou: Yes, absolutely.

Rembrandt Duits: Iconography is a really important concept for us art historians because it involves the subject of images. I work, for instance, in a photographic collection where images are arranged according to their subjects. You can look there for, say, images of dogs, or of battles, or of the crucifixion of Christ.

Angeliki Lymberopoulou: However, there is a duality about the term iconography. On the one hand, we have the historic approach, which is based on Pope Gregory the Great, sixth century Pope Gregory the Great, who basically saw images as the Bible for the illiterate. We need to remember that in the pre-modern era, the majority of the population could neither read nor write. Pope Gregory believed that images could tell a story to those who could not read the Bible texts.

Rembrandt Duits: You mean a bit like a picture book for children?

Angeliki Lymberopoulou: Yes, exactly.

Rembrandt Duits: But on the other hand, we have the art historical use of the term iconography. And for art history, it was given a very precise definition by the famous 20th-century art historian, Erwin Panofsky. And Panofsky argued that iconography was important. We have to understand the subject of each image. Because it is through the subject that the artist conveys meaning. And Panofsky was also the first, in an article of 1934, to talk about hidden symbols in pictures that can convey messages.

Angeliki Lymberopoulou: An example that illustrates Pope Gregory's approach is Giotto's *Entry to Jerusalem*, which is in the Arena Chapel, a fresco painted around 1305. This illustrates the story of the entry to Jerusalem, which is a story narrated by all four evangelists in the Gospels. The story tells us about Jesus going into Jerusalem riding on a humble donkey where he was received like a king before his crucifixion.

What Giotto has done here is to put the Gospel narrative into a pictorial narrative. It is very important to remember that the contemporary audience would have been very familiar with this particular story in the Gospel, because it's a very important story from Christ's life. It marks the beginning of Christ's passion and also the beginning of the Holy Week leading to Easter Sunday.

So what Giotto has done now has put all the elements of the Gospel narrative into a pictorial form. So we see Christ riding on an extremely cute, adorable donkey, coming towards the walls of the city of Jerusalem where the crowd is welcoming him. And also what we need to note here is that Giotto has used the movement from left to right, which is the natural movement of reading for a Western audience. And that, of course, facilitates into putting the Gospel narrative into a pictorial narrative.

Rembrandt Duits: And an example that can illustrate the art historical use of the term iconography is this icon of the Virgin and Child. What you see here is just an image of a woman holding a baby. And that is what Panofsky would have called the pre-iconography, basically that which anybody can recognise in an image, any person in the world, regardless of their cultural background.

But most Western people, of course, would know that this is not just an image of any old woman and child. But that it specifically depicts the Virgin and the baby Jesus. And that is what Panofsky would have called iconography, basically, that which we recognise in an image based on our cultural knowledge, in this case, knowledge of the Christian faith.

Angeliki Lymberopoulou: So basically, that's how we know that this is just not a woman holding her baby. It's just the Virgin and the baby Jesus, the salvation of life, basically.

Rembrandt Duits: Yes. And a visual sign that shows that it is not just any woman and child is the halo. Basically, that circle of light that each of the two figures have around their heads is a symbol of their sacred nature.

Angeliki Lymberopoulou: The term iconography is applicable to all media, not just to two dimensional paintings. It's also applicable to all subjects. It's just not confined to biblical narratives.

For example, in this beautiful 17th-century sculpture by Bernini, we see a man chasing a woman. And the woman is clearly changing into a tree, because we have leaves sprouting from her fingers and her toes.

Rembrandt Duits: That's again the pre-iconography, a man pursuing a woman who is turning into a tree.

Angeliki Lymberopoulou: Exactly. However, for those who have knowledge of classical mythology, they can see into this sculpture the myth of Apollo and Daphne. Basically, the ancient Greek god Apollo was smitten by the nymph Daphne and pursued her. However, Daphne avoided his advances. And then asked for help from her river god father who turned her into a laurel tree. And basically, she started turning into a tree just before Apollo caught her.

Rembrandt Duits: So that's the iconography, the story of Apollo and Daphne.

Angeliki Lymberopoulou: Exactly. And we can see how Bernini has captured that myth and turned it into a pictorial narrative with Apollo pursuing Daphne, the agitation of both figures. And also, Bernini again has used that left to right movement, which is natural for the Western audience. And of course, for those familiar, as we said, with the classical myth, you can see Daphne already turning into a laurel tree in her hands and feet.

Rembrandt Duits: And the transformation of Daphne into a laurel tree, as depicted by Bernini, is one of those visual aids that artists have put into works of art to help us identify the story, the iconography. And as you know, we art historians usually refer to those visual aids as a tribute. And if you look at this picture, for instance, that's a picture that shows a woman who is holding snakes.

And she also has snake-like hair. And she's gnawing at a human heart. Now any idea what the iconography here might be?

Angeliki Lymberopoulou: Well, the iconography probably is about envy and how it actually catches and consumes you with poisonous thoughts and eats away your heart and your whole being.

Rembrandt Duits: Yes. That's correct. Here we have the snakes and the devouring of a human heart as a tribute that helps us identify this particular figure as the figure of envy. And this picture is of a type that we usually call allegory, which is another Greek word literally meaning a different way of saying.

Angeliki Lymberopoulou: Allegoria

Rembrandt Duits: Allegoria.

Angeliki Lymberopoulou: Not straightforward is the association with iconography of the symbols. Symbols provide an additional meaning that artists tend to put sometimes in the work in a hidden form. A good example to illustrate this is this gorgeous painting by Bellini of a virgin and child known as the Madonna of the meadow which was painted sometime in the early 16th century.

For example, the artist has placed a blackbird in a barren tree on the left of the picture. The bird overlooks the Virgin holding in her lap the baby Jesus. Now this can be interpreted as a symbol of death, because it alludes to 33 years later when the dead Christ will be lying on his mother's

lap exactly like that. And again, we have to remember that the contemporary congregation, the faithful, would have been able to make that association very quickly and very clearly.

Rembrandt Duits: Yes. And another symbol that we see here, again to the left of the Virgin, and a bit in the background, is that of a crane or a stork fighting a snake, which is a symbol of the struggle between good and evil. Symbols like that could function, for instance, as memory aids that would tell the viewer why the Virgin and Child are important.

Angeliki Lymberopoulou: For the salvation, exactly, yeah.

Rembrandt Duits: Exactly, for salvation. Now we hope that these examples have explained to you why the term iconography is really important in art history and how it can help us to understand works of art and also to understand the intentions of artists and also the intentions and understanding of their audiences.